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Shakespeare and the Demonization of Fairies

ABSTRACT

The article investigates the canonical plays of William Shakespeare—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*—in an attempt to determine the nature of Shakespeare's position on the early modern tendency to demonize fairy belief and to view fairies as merely a form of demonic manifestation. Fairy belief left its mark on all four plays, to a greater or lesser extent, and intertwined with the religious concerns of the period, it provides an important perspective on the problem of religion in Shakespeare's works. The article will attempt to establish whether Shakespeare subscribed to the tendency of viewing fairies as demonic agents, as epitomized by the *Daemonologie* of King James, or opposed it. Special emphasis will also be put on the conflation of fairies and Catholicism that one finds best exemplified in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. The article draws on a wealth of recent scholarship on early modern fairies, bringing together historical reflection on the changing perception of the fairy figure, research into Shakespeare's attitude towards Catholicism and analyses of the many facets of anti-Catholic polemic emerging from early modern Protestant discourse.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, fairies, Protestant Reformation, Thomas Hobbes.

Gauging Shakespeare's stance on a particular issue or his allegiance to a given set of beliefs has long been a common practice in literary criticism. While in the days before the advent of modern literary studies asking such questions predictably involved an attempt to penetrate the mind of the Bard, in the post-new critical era many of them remain and elude ultimate critical pronouncements, now pertaining to the composite text of the Shakespearean canon rather than the man himself. One such question concerns Shakespeare's religious allegiances and his attitude towards tradition, whether understood in religious or cultural terms. This complex problematic may serve as a good example of the kind of goals Shakespearean scholarship sets itself, daunting in their complexity, yet potentially rewarding in directing focus both to the continuities and disruptive incongruities of the canon. The following article raises an issue that touches upon this particular problem without being explicitly subservient to it, inquiring, as it does, into Shakespeare's position with regard to the changing perception of fairies and the function of fairylore within early modern culture.

Hitherto relegated to the fringes of proper literary criticism,¹ fairyology—as the discipline is sometimes referred to²—is now emerging as a major interdisciplinary field of inquiry, reinvigorating the study of medieval romance and balladry, as well as early modern poetry and drama. With regard to the early modern period, one may distinguish studies that focus predominantly on the figurative uses of the fairy figure in literature in the social context³ and those that look towards broader historical change as the basic paradigm for understanding the invocations of fairylore in both literary and extraliterary sources.⁴ The latter school of criticism, even if it is more historical than properly literary in its scope, has a lot to offer the Shakespearean critic. Painting a vivid picture of a major reinterpretation of the figures of fairies, contiguous with the waning of the Middle Ages, and energized by the Protestant Reformation, historical criticism provides a rudimentary narrative of cultural change against which one can measure the more idiosyncratic, singular or outstanding phenomena emerging in the

¹ An overview of fairy references in Renaissance English literature can be found in Katharine Briggs's *Anatomy of Puck* (1959). For almost half a century this remained the only available introduction to the subject alongside M. W. Latham's even more dated *Elizabethan Fairies* (1930). It was only in the twenty-first century that studies of fairies in literature gained new momentum.

² See Henderson and Cowan (206). The word itself is a Victorian coinage.

³ A good example of this approach would be Marjorie Swann's argument that early modern fairy poetry "attempts to indigenize new forms of elite material display" (449) or Wendy Wall's analysis of how "class-specific elements of fairylore could be taken to represent household and national relations" in plays by Shakespeare (106).

⁴ See Purkiss (*At the Bottom*) and Hutton.

period, among them Shakespeare's canon, which not only reflects the zeitgeist of the era, but also transcends it in its literary complexity. The question which this article raises is whether some of the best-known plays by William Shakespeare attest and endorse the demonization of fairies, a cultural process historically known to be foundational for the evolution of both the popular and literate culture of early modern England. After outlining the nature of this change in the perception of fairies, the following analysis will first prove that Shakespeare's playwriting was not unaffected by it. Then it will attempt to establish whether his plays serve to propagate the new ideology or remain neutral or even conservative in this respect.

196 THE MORAL ALIGNMENT OF FAIRIES

Fairies in folk belief exemplify the liminal in a number of ways. Their moral alignment is liminally ambivalent, as illustrated in the popular ballad of "Thomas Rymmer" that mentions three roads which lead to heaven, hell and Elfland respectively. The first two are predictably described in terms of the hardship or ease of the potential traveller who might want to take either of these paths, which is indicative of their moral significance, the good life being naturally more demanding than wickedness. But the third road is neither narrow (as the former) nor broad (as the latter)—and neither "thick beset with thorns and briers" (Child 324) nor misleading in that it presents itself as something other than it really is;⁵ it is simply a "bonny road" that leads to "fair Elfland" (324), the sheer aestheticism of the adjectival qualifications dismissing any moral considerations. The ballad survives in a version from the very end of the early modern period but is a reworking of the medieval romance of "Thomas of Erceldoune," where we find as many as five roads (Murray 12), the Elfland path being again neither one of those that lead to heaven or paradise nor one that leads to hell or other places of suffering. This testifies to the fact that fairies were traditionally seen as morally neutral, or, when interpreted through the lens of Christian dualism, as ambivalent in this respect, capable of both good and evil without essentially embodying either of these principles. Hence the green "alvisch mon" (elfish man) in the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight can be*—and many times has been—interpreted as an emissary of evil by some and a God-like figure by others.⁶ In general, whether they are literary critics or anthropologists, virtually all scholars agree that fairies are best under-

⁵ "That is the path to wickedness, / Tho some call it the road to heaven" (Child 324).

⁶ For the former view, see Stone. For the latter, see Morgan (152). Such contradictory opinions abound in the criticism of the romance.

stood through their liminality,⁷ and while there is a continuous tendency in European culture to present them as either demonic or angelic, the real nature of their moral alignment escapes the dualistic grid.

Fairies have thus always been seen as tricksters that could easily turn from being amicable to posing a real threat; they “seem to have hovered between these two extremes of the moral spectrum and possess the ability to change their moral stature as and when it suited them” (Wilby, *Cunning Folk* 113). This generated a number of customs aimed at appeasing the fairies, such as, for instance, leaving food for them in order to “promote a fairy’s shift towards beneficence” (114). What is important is that the pressure of the Christian moral paradigm to understand them in clear, black and white terms produced a particular history of the fairy figure and its cultural image—both at the elite and popular level—and from the late Middle Ages onwards a shift may be observed towards the demonic end of the spectrum. Henderson and Cowan place the beginning of the demonization of fairies in the fourteenth century, pointing out that one of the damning charges levelled against Joan of Arc was her familiarity with fairies (127). Significantly, the late Middle Ages is also a time when a similar process of demonization begins to affect the perception of magic and attitudes towards the so-called cunning folk, that is local practitioners of magic, leading in effect to the early modern witch-craze. The likelihood that these two processes are connected may be drawn from the sheer number of analogies between how European culture saw the figure of the witch and its image of the fairy:

There are several motifs familiar to both the fairy and the witch. The power to shape-shift or render oneself invisible; travelling through the air in a whirlwind or on straws or stalks; stealing food or taking the substance from foodstuffs; turning milk or butter bad and destroying crops; abducting children, sometimes replacing them with one of their own, or leaving a stock [fake body]; injuring horses and cattle by shooting them with elf-shot and witch-shot. The time of day or year, such as noon or midnight, May-eve, Midsummer-eve, Halloween, is when they are at their most active. . . . The circular impressions found in grass, often called fairy rings, are also associated with marks left by dancing witches. Both enjoy . . . dancing and feasting. Both have a fondness for indulging in houghmagandie, fairies preferring to take a mortal lover while witches endure sex with the Devil. . . . Paralysis, problems in childbirth, or sudden death, are frequently blamed on their intervention. (Henderson and Cowan 137)

⁷ See Henderson and Cowan (139–45) and Narváez *passim*. Cf. Buccola, *Fairies* 43–45.

The list could be expanded further, and there is a rich and growing literature on the intermingling of witchcraft and fairy belief in the early modern period.⁸ It lies beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the various historical conditions that may have led to the crafting of the witch figure in the late fifteenth century, and the subsequent early modern witch-panic, but the millenarian thinking emerging from the Reformation and the existential uncertainty arising out of the split in Christianity is often given as a major factor in fuelling witch persecutions (Johnstone 27–28), as well as the development of demonological scholarship in Europe from the medieval *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) through Jean Bodin's influential *De la démonomanie des sorciers* (1580) to the *Daemonologie* of King James VI of Scotland (1597). It therefore needs to be considered how the Reformation may also have affected the reinterpretation of fairy belief.

FAIRIES AND PROTESTANTS

Less than an hour's walk from Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh lies Calton Hill, a well-known landmark of the Scottish capital and a place with a rich history of fairy encounters.⁹ If he ever viewed the hill from his palace grounds, King James VI must have felt reasonably confident in his opinion as to the exact nature of the events which are said to have taken place there, for his *Daemonologie* leaves no doubt as to what stories of feasting with fairies inside such hills really signified. This was all a devilish illusion, he argued, and people who spread stories that

they have ben transported with the Phairie to such a hill, which opening, they went in, and there saw a faire Queene [and] [h]ow there was a King and Queene of Phairie, of such a jolly court & train as they had, how they had a teynd, & dutie, as it were . . . how they . . . went, eate and drank, and did all other actiones like naturall men and women (*Daemonologie* 74)

were simply deluded. For King James, fairies are simply one of the many manifestations of the Devil in the world, different only in appearance from the more demonic apparitions but essentially not different in kind from those

⁸ Excellent studies of the phenomenon in question can be found in two books by Emma Wilby: *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits* (2005) and *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* (2010).

⁹ The most famous of these is the tale of the Boy of Leith. See Henderson and Cowan (64).

spirits that haunt particular places or afflict people with terror and madness (57). After all, asks King James,

may not the devil object to their fantasie, their senses being dulled, and as it were a sleepe, such hilles & houses within them, such glistering courtes and traines, and whatsoever such like wherewith he pleaseth to delude them[?] (74)

This was a somewhat extreme view, for, as Ronald Hutton observes, “those who classed fairies as demons pure and simple were rare enough almost to count as radical” (1150), but the persona of the author of the *Daemonologie* was surely enough to make this particular view impossible to ignore, at least in Scotland. Still, while James saw fairies and demons as one and the same, there were others, somewhat less extreme, who also “grouped fairies and devils together, but implied some difference in kind” (Hutton 1148).

The historical fact is that “between c. 1560 and c. 1700 . . . fairies came to be presented as agents of the Devil and all those who had traffic with them as co-conspirators in his grand plan to wreak havoc on good and godly citizens” (Henderson and Cowan 106).¹⁰ They feature extensively in Scottish witch-trial records as the witches’ familiars, cooperating with them and with the Devil in their acts of destruction, as in the case of Isobel Gowdie,¹¹ or even taking the Devil’s place, as in Andro Man’s graphic tale of a fairy sabbath during which he kissed the “airrs” of the fairy queen in adoration, in a similar manner to the demonic *osculum infame* (Henderson and Cowan 133). The reason for this sweeping change in the perception of fairies, is, according to Peter Marshall, that “[t]he Reformation’s emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God left no place for any such autonomous or semi-autonomous spiritual beings to exercise agency in the world” (140). As Marshall puts it, “[b]elief in fairies . . . was utterly incompatible with Reformed doctrine” (140); within the new paradigm, with no purgatory and no conception of moral neutrality, and in the face of the cosmic struggle between God and the Devil, “if what were traditionally thought

¹⁰ Wendy Wall presents the historical process mentioned here in the opposite way. Unlike all the other literary critics and historians, she claims that it was the medieval fairies that were “considered an arm of evil” (73) and that they mutated into the early modern playful pranksters. Wall provides no evidence to back up this controversial claim which goes against the grain of contemporary scholarship.

¹¹ See Wilby, *Visions* (43) for Gowdie’s original confession describing how elves produced arrows for the Devil which the witches would then use in their night-time killing sprees.

of as ghosts and fairies had any objective reality at all, they could only be demons, subservient to Satan, and bent on the spiritual destruction of mankind” (140). It was to a large extent the Reformed clergy who produced this major change in the understanding of fairies in early modern Britain (Marshall 148). The process was further aided by “the tendency among learned commentators to seek to link the fairies and elves of English folkloric belief with classical and pagan deities and spirits [which] reinforced the demonic association” (Marshall 148). Indeed, King James introduces his discussion of fairies in the *Daemonologie* by equating them with “Diana and her wandring court” (73).¹² All in all,

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The objectives of the reformers were undoubtedly well-intended and sincerely inspired, but by reinventing a world where there could only be the forces of good, upheld by God, and the forces of evil, controlled by the Devil, they destroyed the grey area once inhabited by fairies, ghosts and witches, and relegated them all to the dominion of Satan, whose power appeared to be growing ever stronger. (Henderson and Cowan 116)

Some Reformers also had another agenda, which was not so much theological as political. Those who were inclined to question the reality of fairy encounters saw in them “the products of a deluded imagination” and “associate[d] the delusion with the superstitions and impostures of Catholicism” (Hutton 1150). According to this view, the Devil did not so much manifest himself in fairy forms, as inspired by the Catholic lies through which he incited the imagination of the common folk and provoked them to ritualistic—and hence quasi-Catholic—actions to ward off the fairy threat, as well as clouding their judgment: “It was, wrote the Jacobean demonologist Thomas Cooper, through ‘all these Conceits of Fairies etc.’ that ‘the Papists kept the ignorant in awe’” (Marshall 143). This is why King James is quick to add immediately after mentioning the court of Diana that this was an illusion “that was rifest in the time of Papistrie” (74). Keith Thomas refers to this rhetoric as “the Protestant myth that fairy-beliefs were an invention of the Catholic Middle Ages” (610). He explains, however, that even to the medieval clergy “it seemed that people who left out provision for the fairies in the hope of getting rich or gaining good fortune were virtually practising a rival religion” and that this hostile approach was, in fact, only “strengthened by the Reformation” (610).

¹² Wendy Wall sees this otherwise, arguing that as “[c]ountry fairylore blended into classical mythology . . . demonic spirits were rehabilitated and became less sinister” (74). As mentioned above, her article’s claims are on the whole questionable.

The Catholic connection is perhaps best exemplified in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, in which we find an elaborate list of analogies between the Catholic Church and the Kingdom of Fairies. Hobbes explains that the notion of fairies has been maintained "on purpose, either taught, or not confuted, to keep in credit the use of exorcism, of crosses, of holy water, and other such inventions of ghostly men" (14). A brief look at his juxtaposition of fairies and Catholic clergy suffices to understand his strategy:

The ecclesiastics take from young men the use of reason, by certain charms compounded of metaphysics, and miracles, and traditions, and abused Scripture, whereby they are good for nothing else, but to execute what they command them. The fairies likewise are said to take young children out of their cradles, and to change them into natural fools, which common people do therefore call elves, and are apt to mischief.

In what shop, or operatory the fairies make their enchantment, the old wives have not determined. But the operatories of the clergy, are well enough known to be the universities, that received their discipline from authority pontifical.

When the fairies are displeased with anybody, they are said to send their elves, to pinch them. The ecclesiastics, when they are displeased with any civil state, make also their elves, that is, superstitious, enchanted subjects, to pinch their princes, by preaching sedition; or one prince enchanted with promises, to pinch another.

The fairies marry not; but there be amongst them incubi, that have copulation with flesh and blood. The priests also marry not. (464)

Hobbes never finishes the last sentence, leaving it to the reader's imagination to bring the analogy to its logical fruition. This cleverly constructed political satire dismisses fairy belief, presenting it as a mere sham, a cultural and political subterfuge that serves to maintain the hold of Catholic heresies over the minds of the ignorant. Its importance for understanding the demonization of fairies lies in the fact that it associates fairies with Catholicism without apparently taking their existence seriously. Hobbes viewed fairy belief as mere ignorance, seriously detrimental in obscuring judgment and turning people away from what he saw as the true faith, not demonic in the sense of genuinely involving supernatural agents of evil or warranting the use of exorcism but more as the spread of proper education in the matter:

To this, and such like resemblances between the papacy, and the kingdom of fairies, may be added this, that as the fairies have no existence, but in the fancies of ignorant people, rising from the traditions of old wives, or old poets: so the spiritual power of the Pope (without the bounds of his own civil dominion) consisteth only in the fear that seduced people stand in, of their excommunication; upon hearing of false miracles, false traditions, and false interpretations of the Scripture. (464)

Even without this paragraph, which settles the problem for good, it would indeed be difficult to reconcile this kind of rhetoric, which conflates the Catholic clergy and fairies, with the possibility that fairies were actually real. Chaucer pushes a similar point in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” where the idea that friars have supplanted fairies in their erotic countryside escapades similarly serves only to mock the former and implies the purely superstitious nature of belief in the latter.

It is evident that Hobbes did not share the views of zealots like King James, even if the *Leviathan* could easily lend itself to the latter’s belligerent rhetoric with its mention that fairies “have but one universal king, which some poets of ours call King Oberon, but the Scripture calls Be-elzebub” (463). King James may have believed fairies to be illusions. But the illusions which he viewed were alarmingly real and hellish in origin. In fact, it was his conviction of the reality of human-fairy—and thus, in his opinion, human-demon—interactions that prompted King James to take the extreme stance he adopted and to include a section about fairies in a treatise otherwise devoted to what was believed to be the most common type of interactions people had with the Devil, that is witchcraft. One may therefore conclude that a full-blown position endorsing the demonization of fairies, as exemplified by King James VI, would have precluded scepticism towards an actual supernatural agency working in the world and should consequently be at odds with the more satire-oriented rhetoric of conflating fairies and Catholics (while admittedly allowing for positing some sort of link between them). This observation will later prove pertinent in the discussion of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

The degree of belief in the actuality of fairies among the Reformed clergy, and the literate elite in general, and their willingness to dismiss as superstition the finer details of tales of fairy encounters but not the idea that they were indicative of the supernatural forces at play, is quite striking. It would appear that such demonization caught on among those members of the elite who did not exhibit much scepticism in this respect in the first place. Significantly, the possible ways in which popular culture affected the mind-view of the elite have been noted by historians. Peter Marshall points

out that while “[t]he dynamic that we would expect to observe is . . . one of aggressively top-down acculturation” (140),

the trial evidence gives us an impression that, to some extent at least, fairy beliefs were being subsumed into witch beliefs, and the serious attention that inquisitors were giving to familiars by the end of the Tudor period suggests that this cultural traffic was not merely one-way. (150)

Popular culture seamlessly fed into the scholarly and bookish paradigm of the elite and *vice versa*, producing the curious mixture of folk belief and learned demonology that we know from early modern British witchcraft records.¹³

One may object to stressing the actuality of belief in fairies in the seventeenth century, for, as has been mentioned above, we already find in Chaucer the conviction that this belief is a thing of the past. There is also the often-quoted list of supernatural creatures by Reginald Scot from *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) taken from old wives’ tales that he and his peers were nurtured on in their childhood:

Our mothers’ maids have so frayed us with Bull-beggars, Spirits, Witches, Urchins, Elves, Hags, Faeries, Satyrs, Pans, Faunes, Syl[v]ens, Kit-with-the-Canstick, Tritons, Centaurs, Gyants, Impes, Calcars, Conjurors, Nymphs, Changelings, Incubus, Robin Goodfellow, the Spoorne, the Mare, the Man-in-the-Oak, the Hell-wain, the Firedrake, the Puckle, Tom-thombe, Hobgoblin, tom-tumbler, Boneless, and other such Bugs, that we are afraid of our shadow. (qtd. in Lamb 46)

The point that Scot makes in this book is that just as no reasonable gentleman can take beliefs in these beings seriously, so would witchcraft one day be viewed as mere superstition. He thus invokes fairies by way of example as a notion obviously false and not to be entertained by reasonable men. But then, as Keith Thomas notes, a hundred years later, “in the late seventeenth century Sir William Temple could assume that fairy beliefs had only declined in the previous thirty years or so” (607). Diane Purkiss makes sense of these conflicting statements by arguing that “Fairy-beliefs were a sign of an outmoded structure of belief, *always already* on the point of disappearing, and hence associated, like folktales,

¹³ Wilby’s *Visions of Isobel Gowdie* provides the most comprehensive scholarly account of the many ways in which popular fairy beliefs and elite demonology could interact and become intertwined in the early modern period.

with elderly, uneducated women”¹⁴ (*The Witch* 159). One may add that this has not changed at all, as attested by Margaret Bennett’s study on fairy belief in the Scottish village of Balquhider in the 1990s that mentions adults relegating fairy belief to the realm of children’s tales and seeing it as obviously doomed to die out, with the children happily carrying on the tradition of believing, though (94–113). Thus, even if for many, then just as now, the idea of fairies seemed childish and not worthy of being taken seriously, “the *Shepherds Calender* of 1579, for example, admitted that ‘the opinion of Faeries and elfes is very old and yet sticketh very religiously in the mindes of some’” (Marshall 144). While it has been noted in sociological fairy research that a community need not necessarily embrace fairy belief in full to interpret real-life events and construct social meaning with its help (cf. Lamb 39–43), it would appear that among those who genuinely did believe, the proponents of the demonization of fairies were a particularly prominent group.

THE FAIRIES OF SHAKESPEARE

Turning now to Shakespeare, the following argument will first illustrate how Shakespeare’s plays are marked by the demonization of fairies before attempting to analyze their position with regard to the process. Two different yet complementary examples from *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* leave no doubt as to Shakespeare’s awareness of the demonic associations of fairies. In the first scene of the former we find Marcellus commenting on the disappearance of old Hamlet’s ghost:

It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that ever ’gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour’s birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow’d and so gracious is that time. (1.1.162–69)

Fairies and witches are mentioned together, in the same line, as representatives of the forces of evil that are cast away by the rays of the rising sun. Being “taken” by fairies most likely pertains to changelings, that is fairy replacements left behind in the place of stolen children, and need not

¹⁴ Emphasis mine.

in itself be necessarily seen as demonic, but rather emblematic of the fairies' power to interfere with human lives, sometimes to people's benefit and sometimes, as here, to their detriment.¹⁵ However, the line effects a reinterpretation of this traditional folk motif by presenting it on a par with the witches' charms. One may conclude that Marcellus subscribes to the early modern, demonized way of viewing the fairies.

Shakespeare's own stance on the issue is of course more difficult to determine, but the *Midsummer Night* fairies are definitely not what Marcellus would make of them. In Act 3, when Puck reminds Oberon that they need to hasten about their business for the sun is about to rise, the latter makes a statement that cannot be read as anything other than a disclaimer, one that makes it clear to anyone in the audience that has not yet grasped the convention of the play that its fairies are no demons:

PUCK

My fairy lord, this must be done with haste,
For night's swift dragons cut the clouds full fast,
And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger;
At whose approach, ghosts, wandering here and there,
Troop home to churchyards. Damned spirits all,
That in crossways and floods have burial,
Already to their wormy beds are gone.
For fear lest day should look their shames upon,
They wilfully themselves exile from light,
And must for aye consort with black-browed night.

OBERON

But we are spirits of another sort.
I with the morning's love have oft made sport,
And, like a forester, the groves may tread,
Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red,
Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams,
Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.
But notwithstanding, haste; make no delay;
We may effect this business yet ere day. (3.2.378–95)

There is nothing in the plot of the play or the events preceding and following this scene that would require such a disclaimer, and it seems that the

¹⁵ The Arden edition of *Hamlet* explains that "taken" is to be read as bewitched and being stricken by disease, which would suggest an even greater degree of demonization in the passage (177).

rationale behind it was to assuage the concerns the audience brought with them into the playhouse and to justify the actions of the characters on the stage. It would appear that what necessitated it was not the aesthetic or structural demands of the play itself but the audience's default interpretation of fairies as agents of evil which was at odds with the performance and required some kind of reconciliation with what was going on onstage. It served not only to allay the concerns of those who took fairies and their evil provenance seriously—possibly a minority group—but also to explain to all the others that, unusual as it may seem, these particular fairies were quite happy to work their mischief in daylight.

These two examples indicate that Shakespeare was well aware of the demonic interpretation of fairies. Apart from Marcellus, however, one is hard-pressed to find a character in his works (in particular a fairy character) that might be seen as endorsing this reading of fairies. In *The Tempest*, for instance, Prospero seems to work his magic in close cooperation with a whole array of nameless elves, which we only learn about from an apostrophe in which he addresses them directly:

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves,
 And ye that on the sands with printless foot
 Do chase the ebbing Neptune and do fly him
 When he comes back; you demi-puppets that
 By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,
 Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime
 Is to make midnight-mushrooms, that rejoice
 To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid—
 Weak masters though ye be—I have bedimmed
 The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,
 And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault
 Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder
 Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak
 With his own bolt: the strong-based promontory
 Have I made shake and by the spurs plucked up
 The pine and cedar; graves at my command
 Have waked their sleepers, ope'd, and let 'em forth
 By my so potent art. But this rough magic
 I here abjure . . . (5.1.33–51)

There is an interesting caesura in the middle of this address. After presenting the elves' activities in an idyllic way, Prospero moves on to describe his own actions, and these are far more destructive and alarming than any of the images invoked earlier. But at the same time, even if this speech

leads us to the act of abjuring magic on Prospero's part, it is highly suggestive of an evil underside to his magic since it vindicates the elves. The use of pronouns in the passage changes quite dramatically in the middle of the apostrophe, alongside the imagery. Moreover, the sudden shift from "ye" to "I" suggests that whatever evil lay in Prospero's spells, its source was the mage and his will, and not the magical energies of the island that he tapped into. If anything is demonized here, it is the human will to control, and not the elemental forces embodied and represented by the elves.

Shakespeare's strategy in *Macbeth* is different but also difficult to classify as demonization. In the chronicle of Raphael Holinshed on which the play is based we read about Macbeth and Banquo's encounter with three "goddesses of destiny, or else some nymphs or fairies" (Holinshed 143), and there is no mention of any witches here, although the chronicle is no stranger to the notion, as it speaks of witches elsewhere, in its story of King Duff's curse (Shamas 11). Laura Shamas points out, that as late as 1611, "in the description of the production of *Macbeth* at the Globe . . . they were listed as fairies or nymphs" (11). On the other hand, the First Folio consistently calls them witches. Still, any references made outside the actual performance were of little or no relevance to the audiences, which could recognize in the on-stage characterization of the three sisters a number of elements clearly identifying them as proper witches and nothing to suggest they were fairies. Communal activity around the cauldron accompanied by thunder and lightning¹⁶ and the hag-like appearance of the three women lent themselves easily to such interpretations, even if in the dialogue the characters are usually referred to as "weird sisters," the word "witch" being mentioned only once (1.3.6). With no trace of fairies or fairy-references—with one significant exception—in the actual text of the play it is difficult to argue that fairies are demonized in the text. For that to happen they would actually have to feature there, and they are only mentioned when Hecate tells the Weird Sisters: "And now about the cauldron sing / Like elves and fairies in a ring" (4.1.41–42).¹⁷ Diane Purkiss sees in these lines "sheer banality" dissolved in "the joint infantilisation of octosyllabic couplets and the supernatural" (*The Witch* 214). This relegates the witches to where the fairies belonged—the world of childhood and its games, a realm of "dramatic imagination" (214). The implication of this comparison is significant, for it is the witches that are

¹⁶ See Zika (70–98).

¹⁷ The passage was singled out by A. C. Bradley as a potential interpolation (437). The debate as to whether the lines originated from Shakespeare or were a later addition taken from Middleton's play *The Witch* is still highly contentious and the issue is far from being resolved (cf. Taylor *passim*).

compared with fairies, and not the other way round. The subversive potential of the fragment lies thus not so much in effecting a demonization of fairies but rather in a partial de-demonization of the witch-figure produced by enmeshing the latter in the bugbear-stylistics captured so well by Reginald Scot's famous lines about the Elizabethans' fictional childhood terrors.

SHAKESPEARE'S FAIRIES AND CATHOLICISM

One may find scattered references to fairies in many plays by Shakespeare¹⁸—but there are only two works in the entire canon that make extensive use of fairy belief in their plots, and these are *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The latter is of little help in discussing the demonization of fairy belief, for it only features counterfeit fairies, that is people pretending to be elves in order to play a practical joke on Falstaff. The pranksters' efforts and Falstaff's credulity couple in a powerful scene in which Sir John finds himself in danger of being pinched by the fairies—a classic element of popular belief that the play invokes—but there is nothing alarming here, for it is perfectly clear to the audience that the characters impersonate fairies precisely due to the popular perception of the latter as playful tricksters. Although the problem of religion may not strike one as critical in the interpretation of the play and its allusions to the supernatural world, Regina Buccola identifies an interesting link between the play's use of fairies and Catholicism:

One of the ways in which Reform Christians attacked Catholicism in early modern England was to feminize it. Protestants did away with the Catholic significance attached to Mary, the saints (many of whom were women), the religious sisterhood, and scoffed at the elaborate ostentation of the Catholic mass (with its emphasis on ritual ornamentation and display). In relegating all of these female figures or elements such as costuming and “decoration,” which were negatively linked to women in the culture at large, to Catholicism, Reform Christians in effect feminized the entire religion. The connection forged between fairy belief and Catholicism simply reinforced this trend, as fairies were associated with women, their domestic work, and stereotyped images of their physique and moral vicissitudes. (“Shakespeare's Fairy Dance” 169)

¹⁸ Mentions of fairies—usually of no consequence for the plot of the given play—can also be found in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Cymbeline*, *Henry IV Part I*, *King Lear*, *Pericles*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Buccola traces the ways in which the play feminizes the character of the parson, Sir Hugh Evans. She argues that “Shakespeare invokes the three-headed hydra of religious controversies in depicting a Welsh parson as a stage manager of a troop of child-actor fairies,” pointing out that the country of Wales, the world of theatre and the space of Fairyland were “three locales that had proved resistant to conquest by Reform Christianity at the time of his writing” (170). In this way *The Merry Wives of Windsor* may be seen as making a statement about the relationship between religion and fairy belief, yet not directly in the context of the demonization of the latter.

A Midsummer Night’s Dream delves deeper into the relationship between Catholicism and fairies, for it conflates the two words. The last thing that happens in the play, just before Puck’s epilogue, is that Oberon commands the fairies to consecrate the Athenian palace with dew in a way that resembles Catholic rituals involving holy water:

Now, until the break of day
 Through this house each fairy stray.
 To the best bride-bed will we,
 Which by us shall blessed be;
 And the issue there create
 Ever shall be fortunate.
 So shall all the couples three
 Ever true in loving be,
 And the blots of Nature’s hand
 Shall not in their issue stand.
 Never mole, hare lip, nor scar,
 Nor mark prodigious, such as are
 Despised in nativity,
 Shall upon their children be.
 With this field-dew consecrate,
 Every fairy take his gait,
 And each several chamber bless,
 Through this palace, with sweet peace;
 And the owner of it blest
 Ever shall in safety rest. (5.1.379–98)

Oberon’s fairies consecrate the best bridal-bed—presumably that of Theseus and Hippolyta—as well as several chambers of the palace. Even leaving the demonization of fairies aside, the blessing effected in this way strikes one as ambivalent, given the fairies’ proclivity for playing with human offspring:

Certainly, the ambivalence in the fairies' blessing is striking. It is intended to bring about marital happiness and prevent birth defects in the married couples' offspring—the reverse, in fact, of what was normally ascribed to faery intervention—but the word “stray” is jarringly pejorative, showing that Shakespeare does not treat Catholic nostalgia in an unequivocally positive manner. (Shell 91)

Alison Shell argues that the use of the word “stray” engages the religious rhetoric of “anti-Catholic polemic” (92) and plays with the idea of doctrinal delusion; she points to passages in the play where Puck is presented as the one who “mislead[s] night-wanderers” (2.1.39) and leads people astray (3.2.358). Shell argues that the experience of the lovers who are lost in the woods, and are prompted to follow certain paths for the duration of the night by the mischievous Puck recalls the folk belief of “being pixy-led” (92). This can be read both literally and metaphorically, the latter reading suggesting that fairies lead people astray, just like agents of Catholicism. The power of the metaphor is fuelled by the contemporary understanding of being pixy-led, which has nothing to do with the romantic wandering that modern readers may wish to read into the notion!¹⁹

Being pixy-led could simply refer to losing one's way and wandering in circles, but it was also invoked in relation to the phenomenon of *ignes fatui*: methane gases, especially common in marshy areas, which had a misleading resemblance to lanterns. Under this and other names—Will-o'-the-Wisp, Jack O'Lantern—they were a real danger for the early modern traveler. (Shell 92)

A similar picture of fairies producing confusion emerges from *The Tempest*, where the fairy-like Ariel, following the orders of the Italian—and thus presumably Catholic—Duke Prospero sends the shipwreck party on a troublesome errand around the island with his enticing music.

The presentation of fairies in the act of performing Catholic rituals may be read as a form of satire, perhaps milder but not unlike that of Thomas Hobbes. This would imply that the fairies we find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not to be taken too seriously. Putting together Catholicism and fairy magic is difficult as a defence to the former, and one must agree with Alison Shell that “any writer who wanted to endorse the old religion through

¹⁹ As in matters cited above, Wendy Wall disagrees and sees “fooling travelers” as indication of the non-demonic, playful and innocent perception of fairies in the period (73).

imaginative reworking would have been wary of associating it with fairies” (91). Yet, at the same time, any writer who wanted to attack the old religion would not have associated it with such fairies as those which we find in the play. It would appear that Shakespeare attempted neither, and it is hard to find in this play, or any other, a clear religious agenda involving fairies. The light-hearted, non-demonic approach that informs these plays makes it difficult to argue that Shakespeare took fairy belief seriously, but it is not right to question whether Shakespeare or his audiences actually believed in fairies. The fact is these supernatural beings were part and parcel of early modern culture. They were grounded in a set of popular beliefs whose key elements were shared by the common people and the elite, even if some among the latter read it in their own, Reformed and demonized way whilst also disseminating this view. The comic plots of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Tempest* provide conciliatory denouements that dismiss any extremist reading of their fairy figures. The actions of fairies, in turn, can be read in all sorts of ways, but the common denominators of them all are the notions of playfulness and trickery, as well as the fairies’ tendency to interfere with human affairs—the most basic and common elements of fairylore. These are quite independent from their religious interpretations and are unaffected by the processes of demonization. Ultimately, the joke is on those who wish to find in Shakespeare either a clear endorsement of Catholicism or the embracement of Protestantism. The fairies of Shakespeare lead readers astray, especially those who enter the world of his plays with fixed preconceptions about the reality of fairies and their demonic nature.

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